

Writing the Reality of the Other
in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and
Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

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Introduction

Postmodernism maintains a constant dialogic relationship with modernism, a ‘conversation’ which unfolds on the grounds of similar questionings and quests, as those present in the process of representing the past, of exploring consciousness and of discovering the ways of perception. Thus, ‘past’ is revisited, reinvented, enlivened and – using Lyotard’s term from his essay “Rewriting Modernity” – *re-written*, where the act of re-writing suggests a transfer of ideas between the modernist and the postmodernist text. Starting from the 1950s, and particularly from the 1980s, a tendency of specific rewritings can be discovered. A special instance of this type of relation can be found in Ian McEwan’s fiction, especially in his novel, *Atonement* (2001), where several issues of rewritings can be traced, among which one is particularly emphasized; a creation which seemed to attract the interpretation, by its intense *presence* in McEwan’s novel, namely, Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*.

This paper focuses on the ways in which *Atonement*, a twenty-first century novel *re-writes* Woolf’s modernist creation, *Mrs Dalloway*, by analyzing how the worlds of the two novels interfere, and the modes in which these points of interference resonate in their specific contexts. By concentrating on the reality of the self and the other/ Other, we highlight the nature of this writing process, recording and exploring the fine changes and reconnections of the similar aspects in a simultaneous (re)reading of the two works. Thus the writing process refers to both inter- and intra-textual aspects, the reality of the *other* being materialized by the relation between the two texts as intertwining entities and by the interconnectedness of the fictional worlds as such.

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Was everyone else really as alive as she was?

“Was everyone else really as alive as she was? [...] Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony? Did her sister also have a real self concealed behind a breaking wave, and did she spend time thinking about it, with a finger held up to her face? [...] She knew this, but only in a rather arid way; she didn’t really feel it.”
(*Atonement*: 36)

“Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that every one was unreal in one way; much more real in another. It was, she thought, partly their clothes, partly being taken out of their ordinary ways, partly the background, it was possible to say things you couldn’t say anyhow else, things that needed an effort; possible to go much deeper. But not for her; not yet anyhow.”
(*Mrs Dalloway*: 124)

Brian McHale in his *Postmodernist Fiction* argues that the shift between the modern and the postmodern can be characterized in terms of a transition from the epistemological dominant to the ontological one; or – as the introduction of *Postmodernism: A Reader* suggests – from “the philosophy of Identity (‘Know thyself’) to a philosophy of alterity (‘Acknowledge the unknowability of the Other’)” (Docherty, 1993: 17). This sequence is “bidirectional and reversible”, however, the ontological dominant is “more urgent in postmodern texts” (McHale, 1991: 11). A play on the reversibility of ontological-epistemological issues (and the problematic of identity-alterity) can be traced in the two novels, Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* and McEwan’s *Atonement*, by dwelling on the theme of the ‘I and the World’ relation, seen as a connection between the Self and the Other¹.

If viewed from a thematic perspective, the two quotes are strikingly similar; they both refer to the relation of the self and the surrounding world, to a strange feeling of reality (or unreality) of others. However, in the passage from Ian McEwan’s novel, a strong accent is laid on the self-assuredness of the main character, Briony, on her sense of certainty, of definability of the self and especially of a static centrality; and an absolute uncertainty, ambiguity in knowing, ‘reading’, ‘interpreting’ other people. As O’Hara in his article entitled “Briony’s Being-For: Metafictional Narrative Ethics in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*” mentions that: “by virtue of being a self, each of us remains at the center of our own experiential reality; we are irrevocably restricted by that which is not our self, by otherness” (O’Hara, 2010: 74), Briony’s self-oriented vision crystallizes in the way in which she defines herself in relation to others (or defines others in relation to herself). According to Mark Currie, the only way to define

who we are is to tell our own story, [...] to externalise ourselves as if talking of someone else, and for the purposes of self-representation; but also that we learn how to self-narrate from the outside, from other stories, and particularly through the process of identification with other characters (Currie, 1998: 17).

What happens in Part One of *Atonement* is specifically the externalisation of the self (“as if talking of someone else”), and on the course of the story Briony learns “how to self-narrate from the outside” through a multiperspectival retelling of individual lives (O’Hara, 2010: 95).

In *Mrs Dalloway*, the certainty and centrality of the self is shattered together with the unstable existence of others. The stability of existences disperses in situations which are out of the ordinary and the self changes as soon as its position in space is modified (“It was [...] partly being taken out of their ordinary ways, partly the background, [...] it was possible to say things you couldn’t say anyhow else” (*MD*: 124)). As Michael Whitworth notes, Pater’s influence on Woolf is also contoured in the fact that “for Pater, the self is fluid, maintaining harmony with the unstable

¹ Without entering in (lacanian) psychoanalytical reflections, the essay will focus on the interferences of the character’s realities, on the way these spheres interact and influence each other.

external world through a 'constantly renewed mobility of character'" (Whitworth, 2006: 153). In *Atonement*, as the final chapter reveals, a multilayered fictional sphere embraces/encompasses the characters, where 'fiction' and 'reality' intertwines.² That is, the main difference between the two lines of thought framed in the quotes above is the way in which the self positions itself. The distance between "I" and the world, between "I" and the *other* is more accentuated in the case of the lines from McEwan's novel, this space in-between being a more intense one; and it is less contoured in the passage from *Mrs Dalloway*.

This difference arises because of the characters' convictions and the novels' socio-cultural spaces in which they are embedded: Briony Tallis sees with the eyes of the writer of fictions, Clarissa Dalloway with the hostesses' who is about to give a party. One 'revelation'/realization occurs on the field of (textual) realities, in a public space; another in relation with a writer's preconceived fiction. The *others* are guests at an extraordinary event, at one's 'creation'³ (Clarissa), or characters in a double sense as, firstly, characters in a novel (*Atonement's* characters) and, secondly in Briony's creation/story. Later in the novel Briony continues: "She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive. It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you" (AT: 40). The idea of understanding the reality of other people indirectly acknowledges the 'unknowability of the Other' as well.

From a retrospective reading, Briony's above mentioned, presupposed self-assuredness is also shattered, but at a different level from that of Clarissa Dalloway: she realizes "that when this novel is finally published [...] she herself will only become a character" (Ian McEwan, interview with Silverblatt, 2002). The act of her re-writing imposes a second layer of fictionalizing of the narrative world, where the 'thirteen-year-old self' is a re-creation, a memory of the 77-year-old one. Consequently, the remodelled child-perspective cannot be as solid as it would seem without the reader's knowledge of *the* actual author. Moreover, the story was rewritten several times (there were "half a dozen different drafts" (AT: 369); "a new draft, an atonement" (AT: 349)), which implies a continuous re-conceptualization of earlier inner realities and of other's (/outer) realities.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, the re-creational pattern works differently: the feelings of the eighteen-year-old girl are summoned in the present time of the adult woman. Thus, both Briony and Clarissa are recreating the surrounding reality, the reality of the *other*, only their remodelling apparatus

² The interrelation of reality and fiction appears thematically in the text, for example when the cousins of Briony become characters in her play; but in a wider sense the whole novel plays on the ambiguity of the real-fictional net of associations.

³ "And it [her party] was an offering; to combine, to create;" (*Mrs Dalloway*, 61) – thinks Mrs Dalloway at one point.

differs: Briony *rewrites* these realities, Clarissa *remembers* them. The two processes might be called interpretations / re-interpretations, as the term ‘rewriting’ in itself suggests, but involuntarily, remembrance also calls forth an intense feeling of reconsidering the past. It must not be forgotten either, that within the frame of rewritings, Briony also remembers; and another hue is added to Clarissa’s ‘world-creating’ act by Peter Walsh, who thinks she had that “gift, of making a world of her own wherever she happened to be. She came into a room; she stood, as he had often seen her, in a doorway with lots of people round her” (*MD*: 57).

The recollections of Clarissa Dalloway anticipate the ‘literal’ appearance of some characters. Therefore, a character is reshaped, re-interpreted before being actually shaped⁴ (whereas in *Atonement*, the shaping–re-shaping motions seem to occur simultaneously, even to the extent of almost erasing the initial gesture of the two). In this way, the contour, sketch drawn of Peter Walsh is a transformable, expandable, moveable or even ‘erasable’ one; the remembrance of Sally Seton calls up a quite detailed picture, a longer time-space sphere. Clarissa seems to be the one to attract the remembered friends into the narrative (and to her party); however, she is also introduced quite indirectly. She projects herself back into her adolescence, for the ‘plunge’ takes us directly into her own prehistory: Clarissa “plunges into the open air” at “London in the present, and the early morning air at Bourton in her memory” (Whitworth, 2006: 153); feeling at the same time very young and “unspeakably aged” (*MD*: 6). Similarly, the appearance of Briony on the first pages of the novel becomes intensely indirect mostly because of the already discussed “externalization” of the self.

Besides Briony and Clarissa, over the course of the two “perspective-shifting” narratives⁵ “we find characters, again and again, realizing that they are bounded by otherness, by other minds with their own plans, their own interiorities, their own ways of perceiving the world” (O’Hara, 2010: 75).⁶ At this point, the interior–exterior duality referring to the two sides of the self–Other boundary becomes relative. From the shifting perspectives, the self–Other interrelations are reversible, *self-ness* and *other-ness* always depending on the angle of the one who interprets. Even Septimus Warren Smith – who is trapped within memory, who sees everything filtered by the effect of his experience in the past; to whom the reality around is a reflection of additional essences, of unnoticed contractions, of “things conglomerated in the darkness” – perceives the ordering tendency of the outer, homogenizing reality. This is recognizable for example when Lucrezia

⁴ This is similar to the fact that: “re-presenting comes before presence” (which is a specific hue of the avant-garde) (Docherty, 1993: 16).

⁵ Andrew McNeillie finds a close relation to post-impressionism in the perfection of Woolf’s “technique (worked at progressively through *Jacob’s Room* and *Mrs Dalloway* and which owes much indirectly to Henry James) of multiple points of view, where we come very close to Cezanne and his use, in still life, of multiple perspectives, and perhaps also to a species of cubism. We maybe find it too in Woolf’s synthesis of forms and genres” (McNeillie, 2006: 19).

⁶ At this point O’Hara argues about Ian McEwan’s novel, but his affirmation is equally true for the two novels, of course with different connotations.

“interrupts” him; or when Holmes ‘intrudes’ upon him: “Human nature, in short, was on him—the repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils. Holmes was on him. [...] Once you stumble, Septimus wrote on the back of a postcard, human nature is on you. Holmes is on you” (*MD*: 68). What is more, in Sir William Bradshaw’s figure, the need for “divine proportion” is embodied: “Worshipping proportion, Sir William [...] made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion. [...] Sir William with his [...] infallible instinct, this is madness, this sense; in fact, his sense of proportion” (*MD*: 73). The satiric strain underlines the rejection of these ‘divine proportions’, as Whitworth writes that:

While Woolf celebrates forms of rhythmical order which seem to emerge from chaos itself, she directs her most forceful satire at imposed systems of order, whether the ‘real and standard things’ of Victorian life, the social hierarchies contained in Whitaker’s Table of Precedency or Mr Ramsay’s idea of thought progressing from A to Z.. These systems of order are all based either on ideas of linearity, or of hierarchy, the Victorian ‘pyramidal accumulation’ (Mrs D, p. 178). Woolf extends her rejection of these systems to literary aesthetics. (Whitworth, 2006: 154)

What is more, these ‘systems of order’ are not only rejected and subverted, but shown to be inherently distorting because of the effect they have on some characters’ lives (Septimus cannot live with Holmes’s and Sir William’s theories/treatment imposed on him).

Interestingly, the ordering tendency appears literally in *Atonement*, by Briony’s emphasized love of order: “though it offended her sense of order, she knew it was overwhelmingly probable that everyone else had thoughts like hers” (*AT*: 36); “Briony’s sense of obligation, as well as her instinct for order, was powerful; she must complete what she had initiated” (*AT*: 41); “Order must be imposed” (*AT*: 115). The last two quotes are relevant for the entire story, and they carry a possible motivation for Briony’s continuous accusation of Robbie, even though she is not sure about what she saw. Ian McEwan in his interview with Silverblatt explains that Briony is “encouraged to tell a tale that is completely untrue”, “the police and her mother and all authority are encouraging her” (Silverblatt, Ian McEwan, 2002), in fact she is not the only creator of the false story, for a creation can only ‘live’ if it is ‘received’.⁷ Thus, her “passion for order [...] and powerful imagination” (*Ibid.*) are the primary but not the exclusive reasons of her false accusation. The author also says that “this is also a novel about courage and backbone is what Briony at one point feels she lacks, because she is not telling the story actually as it happened, she is burying her consciousness beneath her stream of consciousness” (Silverblatt, Ian McEwan, 2002). Her ‘tale’ at first conceals and then tries to disclose the truth, thus there is “a continuous tension between the narrative and its narration” (Finney, 2002). Briony “has assumed the perspectives of others while claiming to make reparations for the sin of lying” (Ellam, 2009: 23).

⁷ We are referring to the hermeneutical approach, which involves an active dialogic relationship between the literary creation and the reader, presupposing that a text exists if it is read.

On the other hand, the ‘instinct for order’ turns to be very “important in the army, Robbie finds; so beneficial in the hospital, Briony discovers” (Kemp, 2001). The novel suggests that systems of order can be destroying and aiding, their function depending on the context in which they are embedded. In this way the validity of a single meaning is shattered, as well as that of a single perspective. However, it seems paradoxical that the instinct for order is ‘beneficial’ in the context of war, in a situation which is ‘out of order’. But these systems of order might have the role of stable, reliable points in the chaos of the war. Whereas with fiction, the need for order “proves of more ambiguous effect when the artistic temperament impinges on life’s confusions” (Kemp, 2001). The writing process itself becomes an ‘ordering system’, where Briony interprets everything through the filter of her imagination, “confuses imagination and reality” (Messud, 2002), she “imposes the patterns of fiction on the facts of life” (Finney, 2002).

The rehearsals of *The Trials of Arabella* explain in a detailed way how the self-oriented attitude works in a field “bounded by otherness”, because the constructed nature of fiction and the self-ordering pattern clashes with life, with ‘real’ characters. Her cousins cannot and do not conform to the pattern, they break the contours of the characters (from the play), and “for Briony, this deviation from her narrative vision is not just an affront to art but to life as well: “she was Arabella” (AT: 12). Here again, we find a self trying to manage (or, in this case, stage-manage) otherness” (O’Hara, 2010: 76-77) – explicates O’Hara.

The rehearsals also offended her sense of order. The self-contained world she had drawn with clear and perfect lines had been defaced with the scribble of other minds, other needs; and time itself, so easily sectioned on paper into acts and scenes, was even now dribbling uncontrollably away (AT: 36).

The scene functions as a miniaturized but strong instance of the self–Other dynamics⁸, which dynamics is enlarged to the problematic of fictional realities. For Briony “the self-contained world [...] with clear and perfect lines” is not a flexible one, so the ordering tendency involuntarily calls forth the modifying force of the ‘bounding otherness.’ Even so, the otherness is not always confined to the exterior: flash-like senses of an enclosing / restrictive otherness can occur within the dimension of the self as well. When Briony examines her hand, she is wondering how “this thing, this machine for gripping, this fleshy spider on the end of her arm, came to be hers, entirely at her command. Or did it have some little life of its own? [...] There was no stitching, no seam, and yet she knew that behind the smooth continuous fabric was the real self—was it her soul?—which took the decision to cease pretending, and gave the final command” (AT: 35). Later in the novel, Briony

⁸ O’Hara affirms that “interrelations between the self and Other, however, are not limited to the action alone. The same self-Other dynamics found in the primary “events” of the novel are metafactively woven into the fabric of the narrative” (O’Hara, 2010: 75).

feels that “there were parts of her she completely forgotten”⁹ (AT: 286), and that her true self was “here, behind the name badge and uniform” (AT: 280).

In Woolf’s novel, the relevance of ‘otherness’ is emphasised with Septimus – “Septimus, who wasn’t Septimus any longer” (MD: 49) –, who seems to identify himself by searching for projections (“he, Septimus, the lord of men”; scientific discourse); or by dissolving in the visually perceived otherness: “And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement” (MD: 17). Whereas Clarissa feels herself being “everywhere; not “here, here, here”, “what she loved was this, here, now, in front of her”; “being part, she was positive, of the trees at home”; and her ‘externalization’ happens within the space of the moment, for “she sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone” (MD: 6).

This duality of the self, of seeing simultaneously from the inside and the outside is a specific feature of Briony’s ‘technique’ too. She is at the same time an onlooker and a participant¹⁰ of the story at several levels: firstly, as the author of the novel; secondly, as the girl who is watching a “dumb show” (AT: 41), and then interferes in the fate of those whom she has been watching; and thirdly, at the end of the novel, as the writer who attends the performance of the play (*The Trials of Arabella*) written by herself. Moreover, when Briony finally goes to visit Cecilia, other dualities unfold: “she felt a distance between her and another self, no less real, who was walking back towards the hospital. [...] This unreal feeling was heightened” (AT: 329); or Robbie feels a “familiar unreality taking hold” (AT: 255), when asking for water from an old lady. This feeling of unreality can be re-connected with Clarissa’s quite similar sensation in the fragment quoted from *Mrs Dalloway* at the beginning of the chapter: “Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that every one was unreal in one way; much more real in another” (MD: 124). Both characters have such ‘experiences’ when they are moving out of the sphere of the well-known, ‘the ordinary’ and ‘the safe’. This distancing motion offers the possibility of approaching towards *other realities*, creating either an unobserved or a significantly influential bond with them. Clarissa Dalloway presumes that: “since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death . . . perhaps— perhaps” (MD: 111).

⁹ Ian McEwan in his interview with John Sutherland explains that “There is another moment when she is standing on Westminster Bridge and two young officers go by, and she feels a sudden pang - a sense that her life has been completely closed in this hospital, with all these routines, and that something huge is missing from it” (Sutherland, 2002).

¹⁰ Peter Kemp writes that the “drama (in which Briony will be both author and actor) assemble around her” (Kemp, 2001).

Every one was unreal in one way; much more real in another

In order to grasp the way in which these fictional realities interfere and influence each other, from the reality of the self we will turn to the reality of the Other, the two spheres being, as seen above, interdependent and hardly separable. An instance of strong connection is that between Clarissa and Septimus, “whom she never meets and who is intended, Woolf said in her 1928 Introduction to the book, to be Clarissa’s ‘double’” (Dick, 2006: 53). Lady Bruton imagines that realities are “attached by a thin thread, which would stretch and stretch, get thinner and thinner as they walked across London; as if one’s friends were attached to one’s body [...] by a thin thread” (MD: 82). Clarissa feels “quite continuously a sense of” other existences (MD: 89); wanting to ‘connect’ them in the space of a single place (“if only they could be brought together” (MD: 89)). As quoted above, for her “the unseen part” might be “recovered somehow attached to this person or that”, she had “odd affinities [...] with people she had never spoken to” (MD: 111). For Septimus, the outer world is “connected by millions of fibres with his own body” (MD: 17), he is absorbed by the ‘interiorized’ realities or the exteriorized truths of the past.

But the paths/streets of London are also the ground for possible ‘intersections’ between the characters’ realities. In many cases however, the ‘crossings’ are not followed by any influencing endeavours or the act of understanding: for example, Peter passes near Rezia and Septimus, without sensing the true tragedy of the two.¹¹

In other cases, the realities are in a constant interdependent relationship within the field of the past (the youth of Peter, Sally and Clarissa); or in a temporary and instable relation within the present moment (the passing of the motor car; the plane), and these “subjective, sense impressions are at the interface between inner and outer reality” (Banfield, 2007: 56). In *Atonement*, Briony’s sense impressions balance on the boundary between the real and unreal, of the imagined and what truly happened. The “piercing together of ‘what actually happened’ from a variety of perspectives” (Cormack, 2009: 75), connects the hues of the numerous interpretations, for the omniscient narrator is (at least seems to be at first) replaced with “a variety of fragmentary subjective perspectives, [...] each chapter is closely focalized through the consciousness of one character” (Cormack, 2009: 73). Like in *Mrs Dalloway*, these realities circle round one event, thus connecting the characters.

Anne Banfield suggests that “it is largely the novel’s style that establishes these affinities” and “the style’s ability to shift point of view and follow the mind’s wanderings establishes relations between points of view and builds up a common impersonal past” (Banfield, 2007: 59); but it also

¹¹ Susan Dick considers this scene ironic, noting that: “Woolf wants Peter to see the Smiths since his misperception of them as a young couple having a lovers’ spat is deeply ironic. Also his association with Clarissa, whom he had loved and lost when they were young, again links her to Septimus” (Dick, 2006: 53)

builds up a common personal moment in the present, for all the characters are interpreting differently the same event which unfolds around them: “individual responses, while still audible, are subsumed into a continuous train of thought that moves in comic synchrony with the motor car” (DiBattista, 2006: 134). Another ‘common event’ is the aeroplane scene¹², which directs the gazes and thoughts towards a single focus, and causes different readings or misreadings.

These scenes seem to form indirect connections between the realities of the selves, but even if there is a more direct interaction (characters know each other and communicate), “what is most important is not the moments of communication between two subjectivities but the establishment of real correlations between experiences and events” (Banfield, 2007: 60). Moreover, these real correlations are in a constant dialogue between the past and present, between inner and outer realities. The ‘shared past’ (“they would discuss the past. With the two of them (more even than with Richard) she shared her past” (*MD*: 132)) of Clarissa, Peter and Sally is their common reality, endlessly reinterpreted in the space of the present.

When all the characters are brought together in one space, at Clarissa’s party, the realities collide in one sphere; the boundaries become more and more blurred between the self and other selves; between the real and the unreal (“every one was unreal in one way; much more real in another.” (*MD*: 124)); and also within the self (“she had this feeling of being something not herself” (*MD*: 124)). “The typical modernist motif of the party that assembles or re-assembles all the characters of a novel at a single locus” (McHale, 1991: 17), summons even those characters physically absent: Sir Williams tells Clarissa about Septimus; Edith will be told everything that has happened and actually see the party through Ellie’s eyes. However, this modernist motif is also present in *Atonement*, when the Tallises are preparing for Leon’s arrival, but the dinner turns out to be less a place which ‘re-assembles the characters’, for everyone ‘disperses’ in the dark after the twins’ disappearance (the majority outside the house, Emily into her darkened bedroom (*AT*)).

At Clarissa’s party, Ellie Henderson is the one watching and almost recording everything in order to tell Edith what happened (“She must remember everything to tell Edith” (*MD*: 123)). In a way, the same happens with Briony: the scene which she sees from the window urges her to interpret, to tell and then write a story. The verb to *tell* is emphasised because for first her story is shaped when she *affirms* that Robbie is guilty. Both Ellie Henderson and Briony are watching (Ellie also listening) *to tell*, but unlike Ellie, Briony involuntarily sees the scene, and her interpretation works automatically, the need to write is instinctive. She “confuses imagination and reality” (Messud, 2002); “the real with the fictive”, because “fiction determines fact for her” (Finney, 2002).

When analyzing Woolf’s novel, Susan Dick remarks that:

¹² It also “combines many of the perspectives relevant to Virginia Woolf’s modernism: intellectual, technological, social, and literary” (Whitworth, 2006: 146).

Facts are slippery things, the narrative implies, and any single point of view is potentially unreliable. Also, since much of what we learn about most of the characters comes from their thoughts and perceptions we always need to take into account the source of a fact. For instance, whether Elizabeth's dress is pink, as Ellie Henderson and Richard see it (pp. 126, 144), or red, which is what Sally Seton sees (p. 140), depends upon who is looking. (Dick, 2006: 55)

Interpretation always depends on the one who interprets, and this is especially contoured in *Atonement*. Facts are the most “slippery things”, they are in a high degree the sources of misinterpretations (from Briony's view: the scene by the fountain; Robbie's letter for Cecilia; the scene in the library; Cecilia misunderstanding of Robbie and vice versa). If “subjective, sense impressions are at the interface between inner and outer reality” (Banfield, 2007: 56), they cannot be torn apart from neither of the two entities, organically being attached to both; or, approached differently: the online (real-life) perceptions of the characters “need to be complemented by their counterparts in offline perception – the imaginary sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches that one perceives in recollection, vision, hallucination, and dream” (Jahn, 2007: 99).

A great deal of misunderstandings¹³ happen because several visual encounters are not followed by auditory ones. If Briony would have heard and not only seen the scene by the fountain, the misunderstanding would have been less probable; if Cecilia would have asked Robbie why is he taking down his socks when he comes into the house, no misinterpretation would have been made; the miscommunication between the sisters (Briony and Cecilia) was also followed by misinterpretations. But is it truly a situation of missing words, or it is rather, an absence of empathy on the part of the characters? Inability or unwillingness and denial to acknowledge the reality of the other? (Briony is not empathic when (at thirteen) she tries to imagine the scene from three perspectives; she is simply projecting her own thoughts in three different points of view. Of course this is due to her immaturity and inability to decipher the adult world.)

On the contrary, in *Mrs Dalloway* the characters are able to understand each other without words (“They had always this queer power of communicating without words”; Peter knows exactly that Clarissa is going to marry Dalloway), interestingly, words are the ‘ones’ to carry a greater degree of ambiguity: Rezia is told many times that Septimus is not ill. In this case, words ‘mask’ the real, disconnecting ‘actual’ and ‘believed’ meanings. But words or passages can also connect different realities, and underline the way in which characters decipher the surrounding reality. The verse from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* is ‘rewritten’, (we find not only the appearance of a system of sound and repetition, but also a subtle rewriting of the verse [...]. ‘Fear no more the heat o’ the sun’ becomes ‘Fear no more, says the heart.’ (Jensen, 2007: 117)), floating between the two characters,

¹³ Brian Finney sees the misinterpretations between Cecilia and Robbie as being caused by the class system, and explicates that “every time a character misinterprets the situation it proves to be the consequence of a projection on his or her part onto another character. It is particularly ironic that Briony understands for the first time the need to grant others their own unique feelings and thoughts when she first witnesses the scene by the pond” (Finney, 2002).

Clarissa and Septimus, being constantly reshaped; thus “Woolf explores how each character interprets words from the literary past, in the guise of the verse”, and unfolds their readings of “hidden patterns” (Jensen, 2007: 116). In *Atonement* the hidden patterns are misread by Briony, she has to reinterpret, to reconsider their actual meaning.

The play on the absent disambiguating words and the doubtful present ones underpins the paradoxical relation of the themes in *Atonement*: Briony, the one writing the worlds and words, cannot account for their needful, necessary presence. In *Mrs Dalloway*, “Woolf’s doubling of Clarissa and Septimus suggests [...]: here, it is not the words, but the way those words are read, that matters” (Jensen, 2007: 116-117). With this specific relation which encompasses common words, objects and ‘scenes’, recurrences can be viewed as re-interpretations, because their net of associations changes as soon as a new context is solidified; they undergo a kind of metamorphic process. In addition, the re-interpreting gesture of the contemporary novel – besides modifying the initial readings – offers independent meanings of the re-contextualized entities, or, as Nigel Watson affirms (when writing about one of the central tenets of postmodern thought), they “become realities in their own right” (Watson, 2005: 41).

There is a crucial moment in both *Mrs Dalloway* and *Atonement* which changes or “opens” the flow of events: in Ian McEwan’s novel the plot hinges on this “pivotal moment in the characters’ lives, which opens the novel” (Childs, 2005: 171); in *Mrs Dalloway* “the final scene, the terrible scene which he [Peter] believed had mattered more than anything in the whole of his life (it might be an exaggeration—but still so it did seem now) happened at three o’clock in the afternoon of a very hot day” (*MD*: 47), changing the web of relationships. In the two novels this scene by the fountain is rendered indirectly: through the memories of Peter Walsh and Clarissa, and respectively, Briony. In *Atonement* however, the first part ‘masks’ it as an event occurring in the *here and now*. Therefore, the layers imposed on the two incidents slightly differ: in Woolf’s novel, the scene is evoked, made *present* through remembering; in McEwan’s novel, through remembrance *and* re-writing (and/or fictionalizing). Still, the play on the distancing and adducing techniques is equally specific for the two creations. Laura Marcus writes that “McEwan’s signal narrative technique is his representation of the extended temporalities entailed in a singular occurrence: [...] a struggle by a fountain over a vase” (Marcus, 2009: 83). On the one hand, these expanded temporalities suggest the specific situation itself, which is prolonged through the acts of re-interpretations and re-writings (literally “turning “Two Figures by a Fountain” into *Atonement*” (Finney, 2002)); on the other hand, the ‘extension’ is the outcome of the scene’s central importance, being rendered from different

points of view. As the multiperspectival narrative¹⁴ itself, the “struggle by the fountain” is also presented from different angles: Robbie’s, Cecilia’s and Briony’s (and the reader’s) interpretation of the scene; and in *Mrs Dalloway*, from Peter’s and Clarissa’s perspective (without the ‘direct’ presence of the scene). In *Atonement*, the “dumb show” (AT: 41) functions as a mirroring device for the entire narrative structure: Briony “could write the scene three times over, from three points of view” (AT: 40); “now” that “there was nothing left of the dumb show by the fountain beyond what survived in memory, in three separate and overlapping memories” (AT: 41). This line of thought strongly connects to the way in which Clarissa’s and Peter’s youth is ‘made present’ over the flow of the story.

The outcome of the scene by the fountain is constructed on fine twists, being very similar to the one in *Mrs Dalloway*. The broken (and repaired) vase marks the beginning of Robbie’s and Cecilia’s relationship, but the tragic ending of it as well – thus the ending overwrites the beginning; and the scene by the fountain in *Mrs Dalloway* also indicates the end of the relationship between Clarissa and Peter (it must be noted that in this story the spout of the fountain is broken: “and they stood with the fountain between them, the spout (it was broken) dribbling water incessantly” (MD: 48)). Moreover, in *Atonement*, the partly mended vase (“It was not until the late afternoon that Cecilia judged the vase repaired” (AT: 43)) could be seen as a miniature image of Briony’s ‘repairing method’, of her “attempt to make amends for the damage fiction has induced her to cause in the first place” (Finney, 2002). The vase becomes the symbol of the narrative structure and the uncertainty of interpretations; as Brian Finney notes, there is a strong connection between Briony’s testimony and the fragility of the mended vase, affirming that “both the vase and the novel as whole represent a fragile aesthetic form that can easily fall apart” (Finney, 2002). The fragile aesthetic form is closely related to Briony’s aestheticised thinking which she translates on to reality (Albers and Caeners, 2009: 714). Fragmentation is further emphasised with the image of “the broken light” (AT: 29) and the “two triangular pieces” (AT: 29); or even by the fact that each separate perspective shows itself capable of capturing only a fragment of the senses carried by/behind the event.

Besides fragility and fragmentation, another level of interrelation opens up: the vase is filled with wild flowers, and Cecilia makes „some adjustments in order to achieve a natural chaotic look” (AT: 23), which is yet another allusion¹⁵ to the structure of the first part that deliberately creates a ‘natural chaotic’ atmosphere of misunderstandings, where “the truth had become as ghostly as invention” (AT: 41). Briony herself makes ‘some adjustments’ to fit the outer world, her perception

¹⁴ Julie Ellam notes that “the particular use of the shifting point of view also recalls work by James and, occasionally, Woolf as he [McEwan] avoids being restricted by the influence of one author or movement” (Ellam, 2009: 40).

¹⁵ Or the following passage refers to an automatic ordering sense (Briony): “It made no sense, she knew, arranging flowers before the water was in—but there it was; she couldn’t resist moving them around, and not everything people did could be in a correct, logical order, especially when they were alone” (AT: 26)

of the events into a logical and explainable order. The description of the mended vase also abounds in connotations: “and now three fine meandering lines in the glaze, converging like rivers in an atlas, were all that showed. No one would ever know” (AT: 43). The three converging meandering lines allude to the “three separate and overlapping memories” (AT: 41); and the last sentence applies to the story in several ways: no one would ever know in the Tallis family (except Cecilia) that Robbie is innocent if Briony does not choose writing as a form of atoning; Briony would not have been encouraged along the way (Silverblatt, Ian McEwan, 2002) if Robbie does send the intended letter (“Once she opens Robbie’s explicit note to Cecilia, [...] she is forced to reconsider her interpretation of the whole scene” (Finney, 2002)); and Marshall’s story remains unfolded over the course of the unbosomed ‘truths’, because he and Lola get married. The misinterpretations also form a net of the ‘no one would understand’ motif (already discussed in the previous chapter), pointing to the instability of singular perceptions and low empathic frequency.

As already mentioned, these ‘miniaturized signs’ (the few minutes by the fountain; the fragments of the vase; broken pieces) allow the reader insights into the author’s ‘world creating act’¹⁶ and their mirroring effect is intensified through the reflection of the mirroring surfaces (which literally appear in the text). The water, the mirror are series of identity motifs (Ellam quotes Childs, 2009: 74), and the immersion of water could signal the stages of identity-forming.¹⁷ In *Mrs Dalloway*, memories act like mirroring devices. Firstly, when Clarissa looks into the mirror, her sense of identity is ‘reflected’, producing a continuous (and infinite) ‘mirror in the mirror’ effect: her present self is influenced by herself in the past and vice-versa. Secondly, not only she is the one who mirrors the past moments, but she is also shaped in other’s memories. Thirdly, with Septimus, “their respective interior monologues seem, at one level, to be mirror images of each other”, the difference being that “Clarissa, though her thoughts transcend the spatial relations which define her, may always return to those spaces, while Septimus can never return..” (Roe, 2007:180). Windows also unfold reflective ‘surfaces’. The ‘first’ window in the text is the one through which the reader and the character enters into the consciousness, into the past (and literally, into the narrative). One window takes to a looking-back sequence, while another is a possibility of escaping, an “attempt to communicate” (MD: 134). When the motor car passes, “for thirty seconds all heads were inclined the same way—to the window” (MD: 13), that is, windows were attracting the gazes (and thoughts) to a single point. The French windows are ‘present’ in *Atonement* too, permitting “parallelograms of morning sunlight to advance across the powder-blue carpet” (AT: 19): Cecilia “hooked the French

¹⁶ Another hue can be added to this reflexivity, namely the novel’s self-reflexivity. (Ellam quotes McFarlane: “*Atonement* examines its own novelistic mechanisms” (Ellam, 2009: 35))

¹⁷ Julie Ellam argues that this recurrent motif “is used to create a chain of signifiers that signal figurative rebirths and the death of Cecilia” (Ellam, 2009: 73).

windows open wide” (AT: 24), to approach towards the moment that will change the flow of events; and Clarissa “had burst open the French windows” (MD: 3), plunging immediately into the field of memories.

Windows are also boundaries between the inner and outer – as Briony sees Robbie and Cecilia through the closed window (the imperfect mediator), which isolates sounds and the possibility of clearer understanding –; and boundaries between disparate lives, or possible bridges between them. One of the main themes of both novels is the way in which the characters cross these bridges from one reality to the other. As discussed previously, Clarissa acknowledges the ‘unknowability of the Other’; Briony fails to do so at first, but afterwards, her failure shifts “to her appreciation of imaginative transfiguration in the name of the Other” (O’Hara, 2010: 95). When Clarissa “goes to look out of her window, seeing the old lady in the house opposite moving about through two panes of glass – Clarissa’s window, and her own – she gazes at her and thinks she can imagine her limitations, [...] but then, she reflects, the ‘mystery’ of life is in this: that the old lady exists at all” (Roe, 2006:180-181). She is able to overcome the certainty of her subjective interpretations in favour of a more complex attempt to grasp the totality of existence. And the viewed breaks the one-way perception, looking back on the viewer (“in the room opposite the old lady stared straight at her” (MD: 135)), justifying her existence. In this way, the two panes of glass become the reflecting surfaces of different realities.

That is, realities are connected both by words and common events or experiences, always being influenced by other readings and interpretations. Perspectives constantly shift from one character to the other, from the outer to inner realities, shaping a fluid and interdependent relationship between the reality of the Self and the reality of the Other, which is constantly the object of the writing and re-writing process. Self-ness and other-ness are intertwined with the character’s world-creating acts, and orderings of words and patterns. The realities of the modern- and the twentieth century novel are connected, for Ian McEwan is not only re-reading Virginia Woolf, but creates a fine net of associations, almost offers a mirror of *Mrs Dalloway*, modifying and relocating several features of the novel into different contexts. McEwan explicitly reconsiders even some of the most elemental details pertaining to the modernist text’s fictional reality. However, French windows and wild flowers are only a small part of the contoured pattern, which pays attention to the dynamics of perception, the fluidity of experiences and unreliability of single interpretations. In this way, Ian McEwan reinforces the relation of the two novels, shedding a new light on the twentieth-century novel, which can also become the object of reinterpretation for the reader. The constant reshaping force of the texts destabilizes the possibility of linear readings, bringing into motion the patterns of interpretation.

Indeed, *Atonement* ‘creatively extends tradition’ (Dyer, 2001), by enlivening Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, through a re-writing of the realities of selves which are “bounded by otherness” (O’Hara, 2010), of the memories shifting between past and present experiences, and the tissues of imagery and perception. Thus, the Modern, as ‘an-other reality’ is re-thought and re-written.

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